

Message Text

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ACTION EUR-12

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C O N F I D E N T I A L PARIS 17854

E.O. 11652: GDS

TAGS: PFOR FR TS

SUBJECT: TUNISIAN PM NOUIRA'S VISIT TO FRANCE

SUMMARY. ALTHOUGH NO NEW AGREEMENTS WERE ANNOUNCED, PM NOUIRA'S VISIT CENTERED ON ECONOMIC MATTERS CAN BE CONSIDERED SUCCESSFUL, REFLECTING THE CONTINUING GOOD RELATIONS BETWEEN THE TWO COUNTRIES. QUAI OFFICIAL HAS DOUBTS ABOUT FUTURE TUNISIAN STABILITY AND NOUIRA'S PROSPECTS AS LEADER. END SUMMARY.

1. QUAI DESK OFFICER FOR TUNISIA AUBIN DE LA MESSUZIÈRE TOLD US JULY 9 THAT NOUIRA'S JULY 7-9 VISIT TO FRANCE, THE FIRST OFFICIAL VISIT BY A TUNISIAN PRIME MINISTER, WAS "EXEMPLARY," REFLECTING THE EXCELLENT RELATIONS BETWEEN FRANCE AND TUNISIA. THE TONE OF THE VISIT WAS SET BY NOUIRA WHOSE APPROACH IN CONVERSATIONS WITH GISCARD, CHIRAC AND SUAVAGNARGUES WAS MORE THAT OF A MANAGER OR BUSINESSMAN THAN OF A POLITICIAN. ECONOMIC AND COMMERCIAL QUESTIONS CLEARLY HAD PRIORITY OVER
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POLITICS IN NOUIRA'S MIND, AUBIN SAID.

2. THE FRENCH WERE NONCOMMITTAL IN REPLY TO NOUIRA'S REQUEST FOR ADDITIONAL ECONOMIC ASSISTANCE, ACCORDING TO

AUBIN. THE FRENCH GOVERNMENT AGREED, HOWEVER, TO ENCOURAGE PRIVATE INVESTMENT IN TUNISIA, ONE OF THE PRIMARY OBJECTIVES OF THE TRIP. NOUIRA SAW A NUMBER OF FRENCH BUSINESSMEN AND HAD LONG TALKS WITH ELF-ERAP OFFICIALS ON THE EXPLOITATION OF TUNISIAN GAS. THE PRIME MINISTER COMPLAINED ABOUT TUNISIA'S UNFAVORABLE TRADE BALANCE WITH FRANCE AND WAS REMINDED THAT THE TRADE BALANCE TODAY IS MUCH BETTER THAN IN THE PAST AND THAT THE BALANCE OF PAYMENTS IS POSITIVE, THANKS LARGELY TO TUNISIAN IMMIGRANT WORKER REMITTANCES. AUBIN NOTED THAT THERE HAVE BEEN FEWER PROBLEMS WITH TUNISIANS THAN WITH OTHER NORTH AFRICAN WORKERS HERE BECAUSE OF THEIR SMALLER NUMBERS, THE SOMEWHAT BETTER OPINION OF TUNISIANS THAN OF ALGERIANS AND MOROCCANS HELD BY MOST FRENCHMEN, AND THE MARGINALLY HIGHER TRAINING OF THE TUNISIANS.

3. CONCERNING "CONTENTIEUX," THE FRENCH EXPECT THAT THE PROBLEM OF FINANCIAL TRANSFERS WILL BE SOLVED SHORTLY. THE QUESTION OF LAND INDEMNIFICATION REMAINS, HOWEVER, BUT AUBIN SAID HE DID NOT THINK THE MATTER HAD BEEN RAISED. HE OBSERVED THAT WHILE SOME TUNISIANS MIGHT BE PREPARED TO MAKE AT LEAST SYMBOLIC INDEMNIFICATION PAYMENTS IN ACCORDANCE WITH THE 1964 LAW, BOURGUIBA IS INALTERABLE OPPOSED TO EVEN DISCUSSING THE LAND QUESTION. AUBIN LAID THE PRESIDENT'S ATTITUDE TO LOCAL POLITICAL PROBLEMS. HE SAID THAT THE FRENCH WILL NOT PRESS THE MATTER NOW AND THAT INTERIOR MINISTER PONIATOWSKI WILL GO TO TUNIS IN LATE JULY OR EARLY AUGUST TO PREPARE FOR GISCARD'S OFFICIAL VISIT TENTATIVELY PLANNED FOR EARLY NOVEMBER.

4. ACCORDING TO AUBIN, THERE WAS LITTLE DISCUSSION OF INTERNATIONAL PROBLEMS, SUBJECTS RESERVED FOR THE FALL MEETING BETWEEN THE TWO PRESIDENTS. AS EXPECTED, NOUIRA REQUESTED, AND WAS PROMISED, FRENCH SUPPORT IN OVERCOMING ITALIAN RESISTANCE TO PREFERENCES FOR TUNISIAN CONFIDENTIAL

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PRODUCTS UNDER THE NEW EC ASSOCIATION AGREEMENT. AUBIN SAID HE HAD HEARD NOTHING TO CONFIRM PRESS REPORTS THAT NOUIRA RAISED THE SUBJECT OF A MEDITERRANEAN CONFERENCE, ALTHOUGH THE PM DID TALK ABOUT MEDITERRANEAN SOLIDARITY. AUBIN NOTED THAT TUNISIA IS CONCERNED ABOUT FOREIGN FLEETS IN THE MEDITERRANEAN AND ESPECIALLY ABOUT THE LIBYAN MILITARY BUILD-UP. (REPLYING TO A QUESTION, AUBIN PROFESSED IGNORANCE OF ANY RECENT FRENCH SHIP SALES TO LIBYA AND UNDERLINED THE IMPORTANCE OF SOVIET MILITARY SHIPMENTS TO THE COUNTRY.)

5. IN PASSING, AUBIN MADE SOME INTERESTING REMARKS ON THE INTERNAL TUNISIAN SCENE. ADMITTING THE COUNTRY'S

CURRENT RELATIVE PROSPERITY AND POLITICAL STABILITY, HE DOUBTED THIS SITUATION COULD LAST. THERE IS POLITICAL MALAISE, CHARACTERIZED BY THE EXCLUSION OF LIBERALS AND LEFTISTS FROM POSITIONS OF POWER, HE SAID, AND BY THE FACT THAT A FEW ARE BECOMING RICH WHILE OTHER WELL EDUCATED TUNISIANS, IN THE TEACHING PROFESSION, FOR EXAMPLE, ARE PAID SCANDALOUSLY LOW SALARIES. AUBIN THOUGHT PRESENT STABILITY WOULD BE UPSET DANGEROUSLY WHEN BOURGUIBA DEPARTS AND PERSONALLY DOUBTS WHETHER NOUIRA HAS THE STUFF TO HAVE ANY REAL HOPE OF SUCCEEDING HIM, CONSTITUTIONAL PROVISIONS NOTWITHSTANDING. FINALLY, AUBIN MENTIONED THAT NOUIRA WAS "A LITTLE DISAPPOINTED" BY THE MEAGER ASSISTANCE RESULTING FROM HIS TRIP TO THE U.S.

6. COMMENT: THE GENERALLY LOW-KEY TREATMENT OF THE NOUIRA VISIT BY THE FRENCH PRESS REFLECTS THE EXCELLENT, ALMOST PROBLEMLESS STATE OF FRANCO-TUNISIAN RELATIONS. BUT IT ALSO DEMONSTRATES THE FACT THAT TUNISIA'S MORE FLAMBOYANT NEIGHBORS WITH THEIR GROWING ECONOMIC STRENGTH ARE OF MORE INTEREST THAN TUNISIA TO THE PRAGMATIC GISCARD GOVERNMENT. THE HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL TIES THAT BIND THE TWO COUNTRIES, HOWEVER, AS WELL AS CONTINUING FRENCH COMMERCIAL INTEREST, INSURE THAT TUNISIA WILL REMAIN AMONG THE FAVORED, IF NOT THE MOST FAVORED, OF FRANCE'S FOREIGN FRIENDS.
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